

teries with water is essentially a connection between the waters of birth and that of the cosmos; the amniotic fluid is precisely comparable to the water that in many mythologies represents the elementary substance of all things. In early Europe, wells represented secret entrances to the body of the Earth Mother, the Underworld, all leading back to the Well of Wyrd. And because the life force of water came from the Wyrd Sisters it was particularly associated with the mysteries, the powers, the knowledge of women. This connection, this sacred bond between women and water is common to almost all traditional cultures.<sup>20</sup>

At the 'bottom' of the well are the Three Sisters. All wells had a tree next to them, as a natural world representation of the mysterious Well of Wyrd next to the World Tree. In the poem *Svipdagsmal*, it says that the World Tree, nurtured by the sisters, has the power of women's healing. And that its fruits are to be burned in the fire and given to women in childbirth: 'that what is within may pass out'. This use of the World Tree imagery, the eating of 'burned' fruits to aid childbirth,<sup>21</sup> are women's ways of knowing.

Frau Holle, in the ancient Germanic tradition reported by the folklorist Grimm, is believed to keep the spirits of unborn children safe at the bottom of the well until needed. And at birth, babies were sprinkled with water from a sacred well in a naming ceremony which is the origin of the baptismal service<sup>22</sup> – water which was at source from the Well of Wyrd and therefore blessed by the Wyrd Sisters as they nourish the Tree of Life.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Weavers of Destiny: *Changing Our Life Patterns*

## — Interlace —

In old-fashioned history textbooks, we were presented with an image of the peoples of ancient Europe as appearing rather drab, grubbing around with primitive agricultural tools in dreary peasant garb. We now know this to be an inaccurate stereotype, perhaps echoing the 'Dark Ages' label pinned to this period by historians. On the contrary, our ancestors were often dressed not only in beautifully coloured clothing, rendered into a wide variety of bright shades and deep, soft hues by vegetable dyes, but they also wore jewellery. Their hair, arms, fingers and clothes were decorated with necklaces, brooches, pins, arm and finger rings made with a variety of metals and stones. Circular clasps to fasten cloaks at the neck or on the shoulder were crafted from gold, silver and cheaper versions from bronze. Women wore ornate pins in their hair.<sup>1</sup>

The jewellers of those days used well-established methods. For example a Saxon craftsman, for his best work in gold and garnets, first made a base-plate of solid gold. He brazed or soldered gold wires to the base-plate to make a pattern of shallow holes. Into each hole he fitted a piece of gold foil, and then a tiny piece of garnet. The gold foil had a roughened surface which reflected light. This made each tiny stone sparkle brilliantly when light shone upon it. Some of the stone-cutting, and especially the shaping and craft-working of the objects, was magnificent. Everyday jewellery was made as many pieces to the same pattern. Jewellery for the king and other nobles was usually custom-made to unique designs; the finest weapons, shields, helmets and sword hilts of the warriors were often decorated too, and the tribal leaders, warrior classes and wealthy



merchants wore intricate and sometimes stunningly crafted gold work.<sup>2</sup>

But the jewellery of the tribal peoples of ancient Europe is of more than aesthetic interest for us, because it is through the designs of these pieces that we can glimpse another important perspective on the world view of Wyrð. Any art reflects, of course, some aspect of the culture from which it arises, but in the European tribal cultures of a thousand years ago, and still today in some areas of the world, pieces of artwork are not merely for decoration. Rather, they represent ways of attuning to, honouring and celebrating the spiritual world.<sup>3</sup> They are aesthetically pleasing artefacts which are also sacred objects. And the twisting, enmeshed gold filigree of Wyrð artwork encapsulates in its design a central feature of the understanding of the nature of life, and death, of our ancestors.

This feature, common to Saxon, Celtic, and Viking artwork, consisted of ornate and detailed designs, often in gold strand, in which lines of decoration twist and enmesh within each other to form a seemingly unbroken connecting web of interlacing gold strings. It is an image of total interconnectedness. Everything involves and implies everything else as in an all-encompassing ecological system.

But there is a containment to the designs. They do not range randomly, but seem to have a purpose, a direction, a defined pattern. The ancient wood-carvings and metal work, whether representational or abstract, convey a similar impression of constant but controlled motion. The overriding impact is of tremendous vitality and energy contained within a finite universe.<sup>4</sup>

Images from the traditional stories about the creation and nature of life corroborate the impression given here, for everything in the mythological universe of our ancestors is in constant motion, rather like the action of atomic particles in contemporary physics.

The sun and moon are pictured in the stories as fleeing through the heavens, chased by howling wolves, jaws agape to swallow them. The World Tree, the central image around which all the cosmos is pictured, is being chronically undermined, with serpents and dragons gnawing at its roots and deer chewing and eating its branches. But the three Wyrð Sisters refresh and renew the roots of the tree each

morning with potent liquid from a sacred well, for only by this incessant drenching can Yggdrasil maintain its life and strength. Meanwhile a squirrel scurries up and down the full length of the tree bearing insulting messages between an eagle, perched in the topmost branches, and the serpents, gnawing at the roots.

Mythologist Rosalie Wax says that the constant activity of this universe makes her feel as if she 'were watching an intricate ballet in which every entity follows its energetic but true path and fulfills its proper function. The heavenly bodies revolve, and, at the correct distance behind them, come the hungry wolves. The world tree is torn and gnawed, but its branches, nourished by regular applications of sacred liquid, always burgeon anew.'<sup>5</sup> So all the aspects, forces, beings and images in this universe move, not because they have been set in motion by some force external to them, as in our modern 'cause and effect' paradigm, but because movement or action is the very essence of their nature. It is a view much closer to the emerging chaos theories of today, in which underlying order is beyond our grasp if we consider individual elements, but may be visible to us if we attend to the overall pattern of activity.

In contrast to this, our traditional scientific and lay understanding of reality tends to be based on a universe of separate things, animate and inanimate, which act on each other as they 'move about' in empty space, and pass through a series of static states of change. Philip Rawson depicts the way we experience and measure time as dividing it up into countable moments, each of which is separate and, in an abstract way, identical to all others, however large or infinitely small we may choose to make them.<sup>6</sup> In our linear, uni-directional sense of time, these independent things 'cause' each other. This viewpoint has been invaluable in developing science and engineering; observable and repeatable sequences of events in the material world. But for anything more psychologically or spiritually sophisticated, this building-blocks image of the universe breaks down very early on.

But the viewpoint of Wyrð recognises that although concepts of things and states have an experiential reality (a door, for example, is experienced usefully as a thing through which we gain access to



another space), the underlying world of Wyrd is also a seamless web of unbroken movement and change, interconnected at all levels (a door is a tree in transition, on its way to being firewood).

The twisting designs of the jewellery, with its seemingly never-ending intertwining of the gold strands, illustrates that the forces are in perpetual motion, and always in relation to one another. The balance between these forces is precariously maintained. Wax says:

One slack moment on the part of any creature in the universe might lead to a pile up which would bring the whole of the system to ruin . . . If the sun or moon paused in their flight they would be swallowed and light would disappear from the earth. If the wolves became fatigued and took time out, the natural progression of day and night would end. Similarly, if Thor relaxed in his battle against the giants or Odin in his quest for wisdom, Asgard, the citadel of the gods, would fall.<sup>7</sup>

The overall effect of this critical interrelationship of forces, balanced and intertwined, is dynamic, exciting, even exhilarating. It is in tune with the never-ending cycle of birth, death, and the essential vitality of life. Not life as a machine, but life in which each living, breathing, complex organism is inseparable from other organisms and the environment.

The mutual interdependence of each strand of jewellery, in which the knots of gold thread are impossible to unpick and a pull on any thread produces an inevitable and complementary pull on another, and similarly the demise of any aspect of the mythological web of forces entailing a loss of balance and the downfall of another, comprises a vision in which the forces of life are connected by a web of golden threads. These threads link absolutely everything: physical, social, psychological, and psychic events, objects, thoughts, feelings, the material and the ineffable, an interlace so sensitive that any movement, any thought, any happening, no matter how small, reverberates throughout the web.<sup>8</sup>

It seems that our ancestors had a sense of our being inextricably linked not only to the natural world, but to everything else as well, from the trivial and particular to the significant and universal. In this important respect we are still trying to rediscover what we once understood.

### — Weavers of Destiny —

To explore further the significance of the intertwined threads of life I need to return to the Three Sisters, whom I introduced in the earlier chapter on sacred wells; they were all-powerful beings who had authority even over the lives of gods, and were unchallenged in their dominance as symbols of the cycles of life.

The Wyrd Sisters were common to all cultures in ancient western Europe: they were called the Three Norns in Scandinavian culture, the Parcae in Roman society and the Moirai in Greek mythology. It is a particularly strong, idiosyncratic image (there were no Wyrd Brothers) and had such far-reaching currency that it crossed over tribal language barriers which made the speech of one incomprehensible to another. So the Greeks, Romans and north-west Europeans had in common basic ideas concerning these three feminine powers, all-powerful figures of at least six thousand years ago.<sup>9</sup>

In an ancient Icelandic poem the Norns are described arriving at a place called Bralund, where they are attending a woman named Borghild who is giving birth to her child Helgi, a future king.

Then was Helgi, the huge-hearted  
Born in Bralund to Borghild.

Night had fallen when the Norns came,  
Those who appoint a prince's days:  
His fate, they foretold, was fame among men,  
to be thought the best of brave kings.

There in Bralund's broad courts  
They spun the threads of his special destiny:  
They stretched out strings of gold,  
Fastened them under the hall of the moon.<sup>10</sup>

In this beautiful and comprehensive vision, the Wyrd Sisters arrive at night, by moonlight, and foretell the destiny of the child: that Helgi would achieve fame as 'the best of brave kings'. And then they spun the threads which would create his life's unfolding, bring to fruition their prognostication about his future. These threads, connecting and constraining energies, are imaged as spun and fastened strings of gold



which, in their nature and the way they are fastened, create at birth a pattern of life for the newly born person. They are stretched out and fastened 'under the hall of the moon'.

✱ Poetically golden, the image is arresting. Our destiny seen as a golden, glittering, lacy interweaving of fibres like a rudder fastened to the moon. Threads of gold stretching under the hall of the moon, perhaps even from the individual person to the moon, is a vision in which one's pattern of destiny can be seen in the night sky – like the slivers of light which obtain when one squints into the moon. Perhaps the pattern, the weave, was stretched by the gravitational pull of the moon; just as it moves the great oceans in tidal cycles, so it moves the liquid of our brains, our bodies.

But the image means something to do with the unfolding of each individual's life. The Anglo-Saxon word 'gewaef' means 'wove', and its cognate word 'gewif' means 'fortune'. Weaving and destiny, in the imagery of our ancestors, was one and the same thing. They imagined that we all have created for us in our inner nature at birth the frame of a woven pattern that sets our course, framed in golden strings by the Wyrd Sisters. The idea is based on the processes of spinning and weaving which were central to the life of tribespeople in ancient Europe.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly there is a similar conception to that of the traditional Kogi tribes of Colombia, whose inspirational cosmology has survived to the present and has been widely publicised in recent years. In Kogi belief, the Earth is a vast loom, on which the sun weaves two pieces of cloth a year. The top bar of the loom is taken to signify the apparent path of the sun through the sky at the time of the midsummer solstice, while the bottom bar represents its path at the midwinter solstice. The crossing at the centre is the point of intersection of the diagonals of the solstitial sunrises and sunsets.<sup>12</sup>

✱ For our European ancestors, there seems to have existed a similar isomorphism between individual existence and the moving of the vast forces of the universe. The loom of life writ large was essentially the same as the loom of individual lives. The strings and strands of the sun and moon were intertwined inextricably with the strings and strands of our personal lives, forming our own unique patterns as our lives

unfold. In the words of artist and writer Monica Sjöö, talking about indigenous world views in general, 'Cosmic mind and human mind are not essentially different, or separate, nor are cosmic body and human body. Everything is interconnected in a vast webwork . . . a universal weaving – in which each individual thing, or life-form, is a kind of energy knot, or interlock, in the overall vibrating pattern.'<sup>13</sup>

### — Spinning and Weaving —

The making of jewellery was a craft, indeed an art, which was undertaken mainly by men, and we have seen how aspects of the designs open a window on the sacred world view of our ancestors. But another activity was equally central, equally significant in representing, through the materials of everyday life, deeper levels of understanding and attunement: spinning and weaving. And within this familiar process, the basis of cloth production for clothing, blankets, wall hangings and so on, lay a further stage to the idea of life being constructed like interpenetrating strands of fibres, as graphically illustrated in jewellery design. For the spinning and weaving processes, exclusive to women, implied the understanding that our individual lives are structured by the spinning of subtle strings of fibres at our birth, their turning and twisting threads holding us to a course, weaving for us a life pattern.

Of course, spinning and weaving are processes which have lost their impact for us as images for aspects of the deeper realms of life. The spinning and weaving of our textiles is done almost exclusively by industrial machine, thus removing it from direct observation and participation. It is helpful therefore, in considering the possible implications of spinning and weaving images for the ways in which we understand our own lives, to remind ourselves of the early techniques of spinning and weaving.<sup>14</sup>

The people of ancient Europe wore clothes made from flax or wool. Flax is a fibre made from the stem of the blue-flowered flax plant, which produces a light-coloured material still surviving in our contemporary language as in flaxen-coloured hair. But wool, mainly from sheep, was the more widely used material. Sheep-shearing was



done mostly by the men. The women washed and combed the wool, then spun it into yarn and wove it into cloth. Spinning was performed by a woman turning the fleece into yarn by drawing it into a thread with her fingers. The yarn was then attached to a weighted stick called a spindle, which she spun so that it twisted the yarn, giving it extra strength.

The weaving looms were upright frames. The weighted threads of wool which hung down from the top are called the warp. Alternate threads of the warp were attached to a wooden bar called the heddle. The heddle had two positions. By moving it towards her the woman pulled forward the threads attached to it, so that they were in front of the others. She then passed the cross-thread from one side to the other between the two sets of warp threads. Next, she moved the heddle away from her. This allowed the threads attached to it to move to the rear of the others. Now she passed the cross-thread back in the space between them. She repeated these actions again and again, pushing the cross-threads upwards to add to the cloth she had already made.

Archaeological digs throughout Europe have unearthed many examples of the tools used by women in these tasks, including spindles, shears, embroidery workboxes and needles, and the loom-weights, rings of baked clay which were tied to the warp threads on the loom to keep them taut.

### — Spinning into the Sacred —

But spinning and weaving meant more to these women, and the culture of Wyrd, than merely the making of garments and blankets, important though this was; their relation to the task was similar to that of many surviving indigenous cultures today. Among the Navajo peoples of North America, for example, the women weavers 'experience themselves as being directly inspired by the Great Spider Woman, the original weaver of the universe'. Their woven blankets are valued as organic expressions of the special powers of the makers. 'Each blanket with its inspired design has a spiritual significance, and is thought of as giving power and protection to the person who wears it.'<sup>15</sup>

In ancient textiles, a highly charged symbol language was used to communicate story and myth. Spinning and weaving were imbued with magic powers, and inscribed spindle-whorls are found in innumerable neolithic sacrificial pits sacred to the goddess. And in the cultures of early Europe the Three Sisters were the 'original weavers of the universe'. They were also known as the Daughters of the Night, and lived in sacred space in a cave by a pool whose white water gushed freely. The pool was at the base of the World Tree, where the Sisters spun at night by the light of the moon. The threads that they spun formed the destinies of individuals; they were the threads of life.

They had sway over the creation, measuring and ending of individual life. The Greek sisters were depicted as having separate functions: one who spun, another who measured the strings, and a third who cut them to lengths. It is likely that the Sisters of Wyrd were believed to operate in the same way: one creating the golden strings, another laying them out in ways which reflected and determined the life unfolding, and a third who cut them off to length and so determined the lifespan of each thread, and therefore each life.<sup>16</sup>

In the Icelandic myths, one of the three sisters had the name Urd, which means 'Wyrd', life unfolding. Another was Verdandi, the present participle of the verb verda, which means 'be' or 'become'. Being, perhaps. 'To be' is half of the famous question posed by Hamlet: 'To be or not to be . . . that is the question.' This phrase, its fame and recognition far greater even than this celebrated play, seems to strike at the heart of an enduring human existential question; the very words, the posing of the polarities, has potency, even though supremely enigmatic. 'Being' in Wyrd is a state of life.

The third was named Skuld, which has the meaning of something owed, a debt to be settled, an obligation to be fulfilled. Sometimes these three great forces are represented in shorthand as Fate, Being and Necessity.

While the sisters are responsible for an individual's destiny at birth, so also they have dominion over the ending of life. Sometimes they are depicted ruling over the fate of men in battle. The obligation, the debt, of Skuld could represent death . . . the cashing in of one's life debts at the time appointed for death. In a story called *Njal's Saga*



there is reference to death as 'a debt that all must pay'. Certainly an important aspect of the sisters appears to be the ending of life, and this strengthens the case for it. But a debt repaid to whom? The implication, and an intriguing one, is that life is a gift, or at least a loan, and it forms a debt to which we are subject, and which we eventually honour with our life or, rather, with our death. The givers of life are the Wyrd Sisters, and so it seems that the debt is repaid to them. And since the Wyrd Sisters represent forces of balance in the cosmos – the Earth and the sky – it is to this principle that we 'owe our life'. The life we lead has with it a responsibility, as in something owed. To the Earth?

So the interlocking threads which manifest the hidden forces of the universe are also woven into patterns of destiny for our individual lives. But this is a very different concept from the notion of free will which most of us unconsciously adopt in the Western world, leaving us uncomfortable with a notion which sounds rather like determinism. So what do we make of the life threads of our ancestors?

### — Free Will and Destiny —

People naturally differ in the extent to which they ascribe influence over the events of their lives to the external world or to their own actions. But on the whole our everyday lives are conceived as the struggle of our free will to achieve goals which are within our compass. We fight the odds, struggle against social forces, seek to dominate inner doubts and fears. We feel that we have the free will to forge our own destiny, our fortune – and to accept the responsibility for our shortcomings, our failures, broken dreams.

This freedom can be cruel, punishing, life-denying. But we cling to it because the opposite we see as determinism, and that notion, that our lives are preordained and already set on a rigid path, is chilling; it leaves no room for our own action. Free will, for us, is the freedom to choose. And, interestingly, where we begin to feel that our lives are largely determined, that the forces ranged against us are overwhelming, that outcomes are inevitable and beyond our ability to influence, our psychological state is often labelled as depression.

Our notion that we have free will depends to some extent on the idea that we conduct our lives rationally, logically, making decisions by the effort of our conscious minds. Today, in the business world, the military, in education, we are increasingly drawn to trying to understand our lives by constructing models of this supposedly rational process by recourse to the language of the computer. We think of our cognitive functioning in terms of information processing, logical programmes, input and output, feedback loops, and so on. Computer imagery for understanding our own thinking reinforces our assumption that we are taking logical decisions based on practical information. And when we get things wrong, when our lives plunge off into directions other than those we have consciously chosen, we assume that it is because we had the wrong information, or not enough information, or failed to assess correctly the valence and degree of the little box marked 'emotions'.

But of course, another view is that our lives are anything but logical. We are ruled by deep passions, desires, fears and longings – powerful urges we barely acknowledge which sweep from the deep into our dreams and then back again. And while we might be aware of this, and take our decisions as best we can, we do not imagine that those cognitive functions of which we are aware are the sole or even primary processes which weave the pattern of our lives. But the division of life into free will or determinism is a black and white, yes-or-no artificially constrained mind-map of an immeasurably rich and complex landscape of interacting, flowing energies.

### — Changing Our Life Pattern —

For the tribespeople of ancient Europe life was a complex negotiation between what is free and what is ordained. The unfolding of life patterns was subject to the intervention of shamans, and its imagery of spinning and weaving suggests that when we change aspects of our lives, ourselves, instead of changing our 'life-programme' (a terminology that is now current in, for example, management training and business psychology), we change our life-design: the shape, colour, texture, pattern, theme and so on. This imagery for the process of per-



sonal change recognises the integrity of a 'woven' design; the overall pattern of threads can be adapted, developed, rearranged – so long as it honours the basic theme with which it originated.

So using a weaving metaphor in which a life change is seen as effecting a change in an unfolding pattern implies that developing a new pattern for a life is to be accomplished in harmony with the original 'design', rather than in breaking a pattern abruptly and completely, as if inserting a new program into a computer. In the metaphor of weaving, this development of a pattern retains the integrity and strength of the pattern woven so far, but takes it in new directions, creates exciting changes in harmony with what has gone earlier; the pattern can alter and pick up on earlier themes and express them in very different ways. So the process of psychological change seen through the images of our ancestors has an organic and aesthetic feel, rather than that of our contemporary images which encourage everyday notions of psychological change more as a retooling or reprogramming of a machine.

The shamans of ancient Europe, in their healing work, created or attuned to a vision of the pattern of fibres entering individual persons to understand the complexity of forces and the nature of the pattern framing that individual's life.<sup>17</sup> Where appropriate I have worked with people using this idea of a life pattern framing an all-encompassing image of their life, sometimes with dramatic, releasing results. I shall describe here one example of using this framework, and you might feel encouraged to try something like it for understanding the pattern of your own life.

I was working therapeutically with a man who was at the time in his mid-thirties. He had many personal knots to deal with, many psychological doors closed. He had undertaken 'talking' psychotherapy, in which he had discussed with his therapist the nature of the issues in his life, and the possible predisposing experiences of his childhood. But in his case it had made little difference because he felt so utterly confused and paralysed by the multiplicity of his problems. So before dealing with the content and structure of any of the individual issues, we sought to obtain a clear vision of the pattern of his life, the strands that had been spun and the forms in which they had been woven

together. We simply mapped them, and saw the design of his life, so that we could work in an artistically therapeutic way to redesign his life's unfolding pattern.

On a large notepad he listed events, people, issues, experiences, problems, strengths, weaknesses, friends, enemies, triumphs, failures. This work was done quickly; it is remarkable just how much information of this kind is retrievable, stored just below the level of awareness in memories. Each item he listed took only a key word or a few key words for him, for he was communicating the nature of the experience to himself and to me only; they did not need to be articulated at any length at this stage.

We then took a huge sheet of paper, pinned it to the wall, and he began mapping out the pattern of his life. He worked first with a pen, transcribing on to the new sheet significant people and events from his lists, and placing them where he thought appropriate on the new sheet. Some of his items did not seem to need any sense of chronological placing. Others were transcribed by him at a place on the paper roughly corresponding to taking the top of his sheet as the beginning of his life, as in weaving a fabric on a loom, and the bottom of the sheet as the exact moment in which he was working now. The large sheet represented the totality of his life as he had thus far lived it, and as he worked he began to represent it on the sheet.

Soon he was working with felt-tip pens, and then paints, using a different 'thread' colour for each category of items he was listing and marking on the paper. After a couple of hours, the sheet was a mass of colour, with dots, lines, blotches, streaks, curls and twirls, little faces and symbols and so on. And as we gazed at it, trying to take it in as a whole, he began to point to recurring designs, repeated motifs, connected structures and forms. When he found these, he worked on the paper with paint and pens to accentuate them, to make clear the patterns of his life. For him this was an aesthetically clear process; the patterns were strong and vibrant. Emotionally it was both exhilarating and draining. He required plenty of breaks from the work. But the entire process was completed in three long sessions spread over a week, apart from a few brief clarifications of the design which he made at our next session, two weeks later. In his case the finished



work was aesthetically very pleasing, both to him and also to me, as an outside observer, but so long as patterns have been identified and made clear, the artistic merit of the pattern is not important for the process of therapy.

I was very struck by the potency both of the process and the finished pattern for this man's understanding of the sequencing, structures and connections of his life. He was so excited by it that he wanted to delay working on individual strands and motifs until he had had a chance to work more fully with the overall pattern; to appreciate and attune to it in as many ways as possible.

So we choreographed some movement work for him based on the flow of patterns he had created in his life and which were represented creatively on the paper. The first time he performed the entire dance sequence was tremendously cathartic for him, and each time afterwards was a centring, a state of presence within himself, a ritual act of faith in the integrity of his life pattern and, having articulated, painted and danced his way to understanding it, his ability to change it. People's life issues are complex, of course, and need to be addressed in detail in a variety of ways (including the 'talking therapy' with which he had begun), but this process of life-design analysis gave him such a vivid eagle's-eye view of his personal history and present situation, so that he could get his bearings, it gave him the impetus for the hard detailed work to unravel some of his twisted emotional strands. The transformation in his general wellbeing was remarkable.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Dwarfs:

### *Transforming with the Web of Wyrð*

#### — The Threads of Wyrð —

Changing the pattern of our lives necessitates an understanding of the nature of the golden strings, the threads that are 'fastened under the hall of the moon' by the Nornir. The threads are more than a poetic fantasy. They are a metaphor which carries and represents meaning. In the discourse of mythology, of shamanic states of consciousness, of dreamtime, the golden strings have been seen, experienced, touched and manipulated; so what is it that has been experienced in human lives that gives rise to such an image? And what may we learn from it today?

One answer to this question lies in a tale from the ancient tribal cultures of north-west Europe, recorded by the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson. My recounting of it below is based on Snorri's version.<sup>1</sup>

The story is about three gods and a wolf. The three gods were Odin, the magical, cunning, archetypal shaman figure and most dominant of the deities; Thor, the big, blustering god of the farmers who constantly went to battle with the giants; and Tyr, an ancient sky god, harking back to prehistoric times, and who was just coming to the end of his reign as a god and was to be soon replaced by other, newer deities.

The gods adopted the wolf as a pet. Called Fenrir, it was a beautiful and impressive pet, and the gods were proud of it. For a time, that is, while it was small. But as it got bigger and bigger, the gods began to become nervous of it. Soon only the ancient sky god Tyr had the courage to go up to it and give it food. The wolf gulped it down and grew even bigger.

Then one day the gods were alarmed to hear a prophecy that at